Michelle Handler: What the Record Shows

Born c. 1960 — Passed September 22, 2021

A documentary account, not a biography.
Little else is known to us at the time of this writing.

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Craft's firsthand history, archival sources, and analysis are foundational. Claude's original writing, research, and structure form the core of this account; Quillgenie contributed substantial source review, editorial judgment, restructuring, and additional writing.

A note on what this is, and what it cannot be

This is not an obituary. It does not attempt to summarize the decades of Michelle Handler's life that fall outside the surviving record examined here. It is a documentary account of a specific historical period: what she did, said, and was subjected to within the naturist movement, particularly during the conflicts of 1987–1988. The account is reconstructed from contemporaneous letters and notes, organizational records, published movement history, independent reporting, and Nikki Craft's firsthand recollection where that source boundary is specifically identified. The later life is not reconstructed here.

That limitation matters. The absence of a fuller public account is not evidence that Michelle's later life was empty, uneventful, or unknowable. It means only that little else is known to us at the time of this writing. This draft may change as additional correspondence and records now being recovered from the SPLIT files are reviewed.

Leader of the Naturist Leadership Council

Michelle Handler died September 22, 2021, at age 61. Long before the events that ended her participation in organized naturism, she had invested years of work in the movement and in its promises of body acceptance, equality, and community. She led the Naturist Leadership Council (NLC), a national organizing body created to coordinate political work across naturist groups.

The Naturist Society's own written history preserves two of Michelle's substantive political positions. It says that she "decided that one goal of the naturist movement should be to actively oppose the pornography industry," and that she objected to the magazine's emphasis on attractive women. The same history then describes what happened to those positions inside the organization: Michelle "became disruptive to NLC," and the group found itself responding to "her personal agenda."

The history does not literally say that Michelle "went off the deep end." Its wording is more institutional, and for that reason more revealing. A disagreement about pornography, sexualized imagery, and the treatment of women is converted into a problem located in the woman herself. The politics become a "personal agenda"; the woman advancing them becomes "disruptive."

The contemporaneous record supplies the missing context. In spring 1988 Michelle was removed as director on a six-to-five vote. Three groups supporting her refused to cast votes in protest. N.O.P.E. (Nudists and Naturists Opposing Pornographic Exploitation) withdrew from the NLC over her treatment. Writing in Bare In Mind that December, Craft called the vote a "sham election" and wrote that John Kyff and Lee Baxandall had instigated it to remove Michelle. Craft also reminded readers what Michelle had actually done: criticized a Clothed with the Sun centerspread as exploitation and a betrayal of naturist women and feminist values, while making clear that she was speaking for herself rather than for the NLC. Her offense, in part, was that she circulated that criticism to perhaps two hundred naturist leaders without first consulting Baxandall.

That contemporaneous account asked a question the later institutional history does not: "Is it only a woman who must ask permission in this 'lifestyle' before she speaks her mind?" The question went to the double standard at the center of the conflict. Men in publishing and movement leadership exercised broad authority as ordinary institutional practice. A woman who spoke independently about those practices was treated as a problem to be managed.

The cost of dissent

Michelle's own notes from September 14, 1988 show how personal the political conflict had become. She recorded learning of her removal by form letter rather than through direct contact before or during the vote. She also recorded a call from a man identifying himself as a NENA board representative who asked whether she was pursuing the dispute "to get back at Baxandall." Michelle answered: "Who says I want to get back at Lee Baxandall? It's the whole movement… that has disillusioned me. That this has cost me my health."

In the same notes she called John Kyff's role as spokesperson for the Cape Cod case "an outrage and insult to the women involved," describing him as "pro-pornography" and as someone who "speaks and writes as a nudist not a naturist." These were not later reconstructions. They were her own contemporaneous judgments while the conflict was unfolding.

Her sentence about the cost to her health should be allowed to stand in the meaning she gave it in 1988. Nothing in the surviving record permits a claim that the political conflict caused the lung cancer from which she later died, and this account does not make one. What it does establish is that Michelle herself described the struggle, at the time, as having taken a serious toll on her health.

An independent Cape Cod plaintiff — and the question of authority

Michelle was not only an organizational leader commenting from the sidelines. She was one of the Cape Cod plaintiffs and had participated in the shirt-free actions from which the litigation grew. She later became one of the women who organized the feminist plaintiffs' withdrawal from the appeal.

In a September 1, 1988 letter to attorney Jeffrey Denner, Michelle recorded an exchange at the Eastern Naturist Gathering. Lee Baxandall was asked, "Who controls the Cape Cod case?" He answered, "The Naturist Society." Asked what that meant for the plaintiffs, he said: "Well, they've dropped back. There's no doubt about it. The Naturist Society controls the case." Michelle's own response in the letter was blunt: "Who is The Naturist Society? Lee Baxandall, of course, sole owner of this for-profit corporation. Therefore, Lee Baxandall 'controls the case.'" She wrote that she would "not entrust my values to the hands of Lee Baxandall" and asked to have her name removed.

Denner's reply, dated September 8, directly contradicted Baxandall's public description of control: "Lee Baxandall does not control this case. I make all legal decisions relative to prosecuting the matter." Denner added that he had "always been led to believe" that Baxandall, The Naturist Society, and the plaintiffs were aligned, and that until the preceding week no one had told him otherwise. Whatever each man meant by "control," the women were hearing two men make incompatible claims of authority over litigation built from the women's arrests, names, political actions, and legal exposure.

There is an important asymmetry in that language. Baxandall could publicly declare that The Naturist Society controlled the case without the word itself becoming a character indictment. But women controlling their own photographs, bodies, consent, names, and political meaning apparently carried things a bit too far. Then "control" could be recast as a personality defect rather than a legitimate claim to autonomy.

That is why control cannot stand alone in this history. What the women were asserting was autonomy, self-determination, consent, responsibility, and authority over their own images and political work. They were not seeking power over other people. They were resisting other people's claims of power over them.

The feminist plaintiffs eventually exercised the authority that mattered most. They withdrew their names and refused to allow the case to continue carrying a political meaning they no longer accepted. The appeal did not go forward to a merits decision. Whatever competing claims had been made about institutional or legal control, the women demonstrated that no organization, lawyer, or movement leader possessed the authority to compel their consent.

The photographs: a demand for autonomy, not a private grievance

A separate letter dated September 10, 1988, addressed directly to Craft, documents that Michelle had already made a written request in August 1987 asking Baxandall to return photographs taken by her and to stop using photographs of or by her in Clothed with the Sun. She wrote that only a few slides had been returned and that the photographs continued to be used without her authorization more than a year later.

The September 10 letter goes further. Michelle expressly confirmed that she had asked Craft to remove "any photographic images of or by me from the offices of The Naturist Society and Lee Baxandall." She explained that because the photographs continued to be used after she had withdrawn permission, Baxandall had proven himself "unethical and

unworthy of possession of photographs of or by me." The letter closes: "I deeply appreciate your actions on my behalf." Michelle put the authorization in writing. Craft acted on it.

Michelle's request was not simply a dispute over possession. It concerned bodily autonomy, consent, self-determination, and whether a woman who had once permitted nude photographs to be taken or published retained any meaningful authority over how those images would later be possessed, reproduced, stored, or used. The surviving September letter documents Michelle's own position with unusual clarity.

Source-status note: Craft has now physically located additional letters in the SPLIT files from Melissa Farley, Ann Simonton, other women, and some men requesting removal of photographs or images. Those letters have not yet been fully transcribed and reviewed for this draft, so this account does not yet rely on their exact wording. They may materially expand this section.

The printer vault

The surviving Michelle letter establishes the authorization. The mechanics of what followed are preserved here as Craft's firsthand recollection and should be read at that source level.

Craft recalls that the action was deliberate, methodical, and timed so that Baxandall would be away and unable to interfere with it. Before leaving Oshkosh, she went to the printer used for Clothed with the Sun and said that a special shirt-free-rights issue was being prepared and that she needed access to the magazine's production materials. The printer admitted her to the secure production vault and locked the vault while she worked inside for several hours.

Inside, Craft says she went carefully through the original production materials. She removed the women's photographs from the magazine materials and took the corresponding negatives and proofs, working systematically rather than damaging the magazines themselves. She left Oshkosh with the materials a day or two later. She remembers both herself and Michelle being relieved when she got away with it.

The purpose, as Craft describes it now, was not simply to win a fight with Baxandall. It was to prevent women from walking away from the institution while leaving behind nude images over which they no longer had meaningful authority. Some of the women had entered this organizing through relationships and political work Craft herself had helped create. She felt a responsibility not to let inaction leave them vulnerable later and then have that vulnerability mocked or thrown back in their faces as though they had simply chosen to remain victims.

The action was therefore also an exercise in foresight. Craft was thinking beyond the immediate rupture: what might happen to the photographs after everyone scattered, what future uses might be made of them, and what options would remain once the women no longer had access to the institution that held them. Her recollection of the decision is simple: she could see that it needed to be done, no one else had the access and specific knowledge required to do it, and she intended to carry it through without giving anyone the opportunity to stop it.

The women were not going to leave Oshkosh as helpless casualties of the conflict. Where action was still possible, Craft intended to take it. In that sense the vault action belongs to the same political history as the withdrawal from the case: it was an assertion of autonomy, self-determination, consent, and responsibility at the point where those things could still be exercised.

Nudity, cameras, and the problem of objectification

Michelle Handler's experience with nude photography should not be treated as an unusual exception. Naturism presents nudity as a wholesome, free-spirited experience of body acceptance, and for many people it can be exactly that. But the introduction of a camera changes the conditions. A spontaneous day at a beach, camp, gathering, or private setting can become a permanent image controlled by someone else. What began as bodily freedom can become objectification.

Body acceptance means that a woman can be nude without becoming a visual commodity. It does not mean that a photographer, publisher, partner, friend, or institution acquires an unlimited claim on her image. Comfort with nudity is not consent to unlimited photography. Consent to being photographed is not necessarily consent to every later use. Trusting someone with an intimate image can have consequences long after the original moment has passed.

Michelle's record supplies a practical warning without requiring any abstract theory: she withdrew permission and asked for her photographs back. More than a year later, according to her own letter, they were still being used without her authorization. The body could be free until somebody turned its image into an object for somebody else's use.

This was not merely a private feud

Independent reporting from the period shows that the conflict extended well beyond Michelle and Craft. In March 1990, The New Yorker described an "extended, furious debate" in the naturist press between Baxandall and Craft and reported that about one hundred naturists, male and female, had defected over the preceding three years because they believed nudist and naturist publishers were pandering to male readers with "cheesecake" photographs of nude women. The same article described the feminist dispute as one over a Naturist Society policy of subordinating concerns about women's rights to the fight for nude beaches.

That contemporary outside account matters because it makes the scale of the disagreement visible. The conflict was not adequately explained as a personal falling-out, one woman's "agenda," or a sudden rejection of naturism. It involved a substantial argument about whether the movement's rhetoric of freedom and body acceptance would include women's equality, women's authority over their own images, and women's right to define the political meaning of their own bodies.

What the movement itself admits happened after she left

The Naturist Leadership Council was replaced by the NNLC, formed in June 1988 with the backing of both The Naturist Society and the American Sunbathing Association. The movement's own written history records what became of the successor: "NNLC struggled… to turn itself into a cohesive and effective political force. Its leadership structure never quite solidified and funding was always a problem."

That does not prove why the successor failed. It does establish something narrower. Michelle had been doing substantive organizing work before she was characterized as disruptive and removed. The organization that followed her had greater institutional backing and still struggled to create the leadership structure and political force it sought. She had been doing the work.

Retaliation followed by diminishment

Lee Baxandall is not the subject of this piece, but the record cannot be accurately stated without naming his role. His response to dissent was authoritarian and retaliatory. Michelle challenged his editorial decisions, opposed the sexualized presentation of women, objected to the continued use of her photographs, and ultimately broke with the movement. She was then removed from leadership, her objections were characterized as disruptive and as a "personal agenda," and the later institutional history largely wrote her substantive contribution out of the movement's story. Taken together, this is not neutral institutional history. It is a record of retaliation followed by diminishment.

The conflict was also not gender-neutral. The women were confronting a movement in which male publishers and male legal and organizational authorities repeatedly claimed the power to define the priorities: free expression, nude-beach access, litigation strategy, magazine policy. Contemporary independent reporting documented the charge that publishers catered to male readers with sexualized images of women and that women's rights were being subordinated to the broader naturist agenda. The feminist objection was not that men could never hold authority. It was that women's bodies, images, legal names, and political purposes could not legitimately be treated as institutional resources over which those authorities had the final word.

What can be said about Michelle, plainly

Michelle Handler held elected leadership of a national organization. She identified that opposition to pornography and the sexualized presentation of women belonged inside naturist politics and acted on those convictions publicly at real institutional cost. She did not act alone: three supporting groups refused to participate in the vote that removed her; N.O.P.E. withdrew in protest; Marianna Hoppe-Handler, Carl Flick, and Nina Silver wrote to Bare In Mind objecting to the one-sided publication of Kyff's attack; and Michelle joined the other feminist Cape Cod plaintiffs in organizing and signing the withdrawal that ended their participation in the appeal.

There was real courage in what these women did. Michelle provided one of its clearest examples: a steadfast courage that did not disappear when dissent became costly, personal, isolating, and painful. She held to the political principles that had brought her into the movement even when the movement itself turned against her for doing so.

Her middle name was Joy, given to her by her mother. The Naturist Society's written history preserves instead the phrases "became disruptive" and "her personal agenda." The surviving record restores the work, judgment, solidarity, feminist politics, and personal cost behind those phrases.

The importance of this episode does not depend on how many people remember it. Whatever claims were being made about who controlled the litigation or the institution, the women demonstrated that there was one authority no organization, lawyer, publisher, or movement leader possessed: the authority to compel their consent. They withdrew their names. They asserted autonomy over their images. They refused to allow someone else to define the political meaning of their bodies.

That mattered then. It is worth preserving now so that women who encounter this record later can see not only what was done to Michelle Handler, but what she and the women beside her did in response. They stood up to it.

Source and revision note

This draft distinguishes contemporaneous documents from later firsthand recollection. Michelle Handler's September 10, 1988 letter is direct contemporaneous evidence that she authorized Nikki Craft to remove photographs of or by her from the offices of The Naturist Society and Lee Baxandall. The detailed printer-vault sequence is Craft's present firsthand recollection and has not yet been independently corroborated by a contemporaneous document reviewed for this draft. Newly recovered SPLIT correspondence may add or alter details and should be incorporated before any claim of finality.

Independent context cited in the text: Michael Stern and Jane Stern, "Decent Exposure," The New Yorker, March 12, 1990. This citation and its figure on naturist defections have been confirmed directly against the archived copy of the piece.

Related records in the Nikki Craft archival project

- Feminist Plaintiffs Withdraw from Cape Cod Nudity Case — https://archive.org/details/capecod-withdrawal-with-links
- Cape Cod Withdrawal Supporters List — https://archive.org/details/split-15-cape-cod-withdrawal-supporters-list
- "Craft Wins — Nudists Lose": John Kyff's November 1988 Attack on Nikki Craft in Bare In Mind — https://archive.org/details/split-07-craft-wins-nudists-lose
- Letter to the Nudist/Naturist Leadership Council Concerning John Kyff, Lee Baxandall, and N.O.P.E. — December 20, 1988 — https://archive.org/details/split-16-nnlc-larry-landrum-kyff-letter-2026-08-01
- Open Letter to John Kyff from Nikki Craft — November 25, 1987 — https://archive.org/details/split-01-kyff-open-letter-1987-2026-07-25

SPLIT is the documentary series preserving the 1986–1995 rupture between Nikki Craft, the Cape Cod plaintiffs, and Lee Baxandall/The Naturist Society. See SPLIT-000 for the full account.